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AUTHOR Mader, Diane C.
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ABSTRACT

Addressing the academically troubled student's central problem in creating effective written and oral compositions--difficulty in analyzing and synthesizing material--a sequence of speech writing courses videotapes, and then holds class discussions of, student speech-compositions. Utilizing the student's relative facility in speech, this stimulating taping/discussion format offers immediate and continued class and teacher feedback. Discussions help the speaker see where points need to be developed, relationships are weak, or steps do not follow. More than a teacher's marginal comments could, these oral evaluations encourage audience-centered communication. Leading the student to generate new ideas, explore his or her assumptions, and work through to conclusions, the courses help the student build the critical thinking skills necessary not only for effective communication, but for academic success. (MM)

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A Proposed Speech-Writing Sequence For the Underprepared Student

Diane C. Mader
Assistant Professor
SUNY/College at Old Westbury

For the Eastern
Communication Association
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CS 504 249

A PROPOSED SPEECH-WRITING SEQUENCE FOR THE UNDERPREPARED STUDENT

There has been controversy over the nature of the oral and written communication competencies that the underprepared student lacks. According to Basil Bernstein,[1] the difficulty lies in the use of a restricted code which is context bound, concrete, predictable, categorical, and simple in syntax. This reflects behavior patterns which value results (Get the job done; don't ask why), skills (This is how to do the job; you don't need to understand how the machine works), and positional controls (Do it because you're told to do it.). In short, the underprepared student is one who doesn't ask the same questions and think the same thoughts as the academically prepared student. This position has been disputed by Labov[2] and Ohmann,[3] among others, who assert that the characteristics of the code (language) used are a function of the social dynamics of the interaction. For example, they result from the power relations between the interactants, status (expert or not), intimacy (or its lack), the situation (familiar or unfamiliar, impromptu or prepared), and the communication strategies of the other person (judgmental or evaluative). Therefore, the use of a restricted code is elicited by a myriad of factors and is not necessarily characteristic of the individual.

However, regardless of the dispute over the nature or cause of a student's inability to produce messages which serve his academic needs, the fact is that the academically troubled student encounters difficulty in creating oral and written compositions directed to the academic arena. (Parenthetically, of course, the larger significance is the fundamental belief that the ability to create oral and written compositions is basic to success in the larger arenas of career, citizenship, and personal development.) Andrea Lunsford observes that the central difficulty of underprepared students is that they "have not attained that level of cognitive development which would allow them to form abstractions

and conceptions."[4] Even if we are to credit Labov and Ohmann's position and grant that this inability is due to the context of the interaction and its social dynamics, the fact remains that these students are not able to engage in the kind of analysis and synthesis that is demanded for survival in the academic setting.

In her article, "Assessing, Reading, Writing, and Reasoning,"[5] Marilyn Sternglass adopts Wilkinson's description of cognitive levels:

> DESCRIBING There is a move from labelling and naming, via simple statements and incomplete information, to reporting of a complete sequence.
>
> INTERPRETING The development is from a simple explanation or inference or assessment to a deduction drawing on a series of (e.g., causal) links.
>
> GENERALIZING The baseline would be a generalized concrete statement, moving to a summation of a whole section, and thence to the generalizations implied by a classificatory system.
>
> SPECULATING The movement here is from inadequate simple hypothesis at the statement level, via exploring and project[ing] at the discourse level, to controlled and extended theorizing.[6]

She identified the student who has difficulty in interpreting, generalizing, and speculating as the student who can benefit from direct instruction in analysis and synthesis. It is here that I wish to express my concern over the direction of speech communication education.

In attempting to meet the underprepared students' needs, some communi-

cation practitioners focus on language skills deficiencies and identify such competencies as the ability to listen effectively, ask questions, give directions, do research, use Standard English, speak fluently with correct articulation, and the ability to outline and organize ideas as the desired outcomes of communication training.[7] I do not quarrel with the desirability of having students ultimately possess these competencies; however, I do question whether such a basic skills approach will be effective and whether it should be our first line of attack. Students may be able to develop a skill in isolation, yet be unable to transfer it into new situations. Moreover, a basic skills approach does not address the students' more pressing survival needs, the ability to analyze and synthesize which is the goal of our remedial education. One researcher in speech communication suggested that remedial students need to change the orientation that has led to repeated failure in educational tasks. Thus, courses in voice and articulation and in speech skills are not sufficient because specific pieces of information do not change the system, i.e., the person being taught.[8] What is needed is assistance in helping these students to develop their ability to formulate arguments, to analyze and synthesize.

Therefore, what I am urging is that we in speech communication who seek to assist the underprepared student ought to go back to our rhetorical roots which stressed critical thinking and cognitive growth, which have come to be appreciated as the most productive approach to overcoming the deficiencies of those students who, by traditional standards, are not ready for college. The need is to help students develop those basic thinking processes involved in invention and arrangement which are taught in public speaking and argumentation courses. The concern is with the ability to analyze and synthesize, i.e., with generating ideas, drawing implications, exploring assumptions, working through to conclusions, and testing and revising these conclusions in a constant monitoring process.

The purpose of this paper is to suggest a coordinated speech-writing sequence of courses which will meet these objectives, and to do this in ways which will engage and excite students as well as contribute to their growth in critical thinking and cognitive skills. It attempts to incorporate the following features from Maxine Harston's paradigm for teaching writing (read: composing):[9] 1) It focuses on the process; instructor's intervene in students' composing during the process; 2) It teaches strategies for invention and discovery; instructors help students to generate content and discover purposes; and 3) It is rhetorically based; audience, purpose and occasion figure prominently in the assignment of composing tasks.

I do not suggest the coordinated speaking-writing sequence because the topoi are the same, but because the speech class can help students to understand the processes in which they are engaging. This understanding is essential because good composers "seem to have greater conscious control over their own processes."[10] In the broader context, Vygotsky tells us that "All of the higher functions in the cultural development of the individual have three things in common: awareness, abstraction, and control."[11] The objective is to make better thinkers who will become better communicators who will function better as students.

I envision paired speaking-writing courses in which coordinated syllabi and assignments complement and reinforce each other and in which extensive use of video equipment capitalizes on the modern students' primary learning mode. Speech compositions will be taped and played back for students to observe, identify, and judge specific elements in the speaking, listening, and composing processes in order to develop students' powers of observation, reflection, and drawing conclusions.

It is a truism that communication is purposeful; that is, it is the result of a need to share meaning or to influence others. This suggests that communica-

tors, speakers or writers, attend to meaning before form; they seek to produce messages that make ideas visible to receivers (although some of our academically troubled students require assistance in generating these ideas). Add to these two facts the reality that talk proceeds more easily than writing. Therefore, this proposal focuses on communication purpose, encourages student experimentation in creating messages, utilizes the relative facility students feel in the speaking situation, intervenes in the composing process, and provides students with continuous feedback. It also concentrates on those processes of invention and arrangement which are the substance of critical thinking. It may even be welcomed by those teachers of writing who agree with James Moffett that for students to develop their own abstrations and interpretations, that is, for them to speak or write in great detail, there is required". . . the interplay of inner voices out into the social world, where the give-and-take of minds and voices can lift each member beyond where he or she started. This requires enormously more small-group interaction than classrooms now foster--task talk, improvisation, and topic discussion."[12]

What I am proposing here was first suggested to me by the insights and reactions of some students in my public speaking class who were taking an English composition course at the same time. Now, it happens that I also teach writing and have used the standard analysis of written messages to get across the concepts of thesis, coherence, transitions, and so on. In one class I had given a standard assignment to develop a single point speech by stating a thesis, using a variety of supporting materials, and drawing a conclusion. During the playback of one of the speeches, someone observed that when the speaker had concluded her one point speech, she went on to another point which she left undeveloped. Someone else in the class asked, "Is that what my writing teacher means when she says that the point is irrelevant? That my paragraph isn't united?"

There followed a general buzzing among the class, and it turned out that an abstraction from the writing class had suddenly become concrete, visible, and understood. It dawned on me that here was a way to illustrate very graphically the principles that were being discussed in writing classes.

The benefits of videotaping and playing back speech-compositions are multiple: 1) No feedback is as clear or pointed in demonstrating strengths and weaknesses as the replay of the person as a communicator-in-process; 2) It helps to give students confidence as they (to their surprise) discover in themselves communication competencies which they did not dream existed; 3) It maintains class interest at a high level; 4) It provides for the class approximately fifteen samples of composition for analysis in a two-hour period; 5) It permits direct intervention in the composing process; 6) It allows oscillation among the various sub-processes involved in composing; and 7) It provides for instant revision and testing for effect.

Instead of focusing on difficulties, I simply ask students to create messages. The assignments themselves are not very unusual. I begin with a series of four ungraded assignments to encourage spontaneity, participation, and experimentation and to build confidence. The first is a speech of introduction; the second assignment is narration, to choose an experience from the past---awful, wonderful, painful, poignant---and to recreate its physical and psychological details for the class. The instruction is given that the anecdote should make a point and it should be relevant. The third speech is a one-point speech based on a proverb, and the fourth is a pet peeve speech. Students then move to graded speeches of demonstration, information, persuasion, and argumentation. As appropriate, students are given instruction in listening (both to understand and to evaluate); in determining specific purpose; in analyzing audiences; in how to find material for oral and written compositions; in kinds of supporting

materials to use; in organization of the body, introduction, and conclusion of a composition; and in the simple outline.

Each assignment is specific and limited, and the effect of them all is cumulative in that students progress from a composition that has little structure, supporting material, or development and reasoning to one that requires explicit organization, a variety of supporting materials, and chains of reasoning. The benefit of the assignments derives as much from the playback of the videotapes as from the assignments themselves. Viewers analyze messages and meanings intended by the senders and identify the reasons for the effectivensss or lack of effectiveness of a particular message. The class is encouraged to ask questions that would make the message clearer, and these serve as feedback (multiple rather than merely the teacher's) to the speaker-composer as to how his/her data, organization, and transitions created meaning for receivers. Students are helped to develop retrospective maps of where their thinking has been. It is through this trial and error process that the speaker-writer-composer develops the elaborate language that makes meaning comprehensible to receivers (hearers-readers) who do not share the senders' contexts. By videotaping and playing back students' speeches, we promote active, immediate, on-the-spot analysis of many compositions with provision for immediate revision or composition-as-process. It allows students to see vividly where there are points in need of elaboration, where relationships among points are not clear, where the steps in the pattern of development do not follow, where there seems to be no point or thesis, where the speaker becomes sidetracked on an irrelevant or subsidiary point, or where the speaker shifts points in mid-stream.

Equally important, this procedures is pedagogically sound. Flower and Hayes[13] tape-recorded successful student writers in the act of composing just as they normally would, except that the students did it out loud into tape recorders.

Flower and Hayes identified four activities that occurred: planning, translating, reviewing, and monitoring. Specifically, this meant that a student generated ideas in terms of a defined or redefined rhetorical problem (goal), organized and structured these ideas, and translated them with an eye to revision or to proceeding to the next part of the message. All of this was constantly monitored so that the entire process was recurrent and recursive; that is, there was continuous planning, translating and reviewing, and any part of the process might be embedded in another. Through the video-playback described above, we are able to produce real examples of the composing activities and intervene, explore, and monitor the decisions being made.

In short, the playback of videotape allows a class to play with composition, and it makes students conscious of the activities in the composing process. Instant revision is possible, and the assumption of basic composers that the reader or hearer understands what is going on in the composer's head and, therefore, needs no introductions, transitions, or explanations is vividly dispelled.

Moreover, there is an added benefit in having constantly to keep a real audience in mind. A communicator's goal may be cl ear or unclear, too narrow or grandiose, directed to her own satisfaction or to the needs of a real audience. (My impression is that, too often, both speakers and writers compose to please themselves.) James Moffett believes that even mechanical difficulties may occur in writing because the writer has forgotten his audience.[14] Gibson puts it more colorfully, "The failure of the unsuccessful writer is a failure of imagination; a failure to forecast what it's going to be like to be a dumb reader of the document."[15] However, in a speech course, it is more difficult to forget the audience. In a speech sequence such as that described above which builds in audience feedback to taped communicators, the communicator forgets the audience at her peril.

I have concentrated in this paper on the speech sequence of my "Proposed

Speech-Writing Sequence for the Underprepared Student." Because there is a time penalty built into the playback of videotaped speeches, the sequence might take two semesters unless classes are held to fifteen. However, this is not necessarily a weakness because underprepared students typically require at least two semesters to remediate their writing difficulties, and they do so with only a very tenuous grasp of the competencies they are supposed to be acquiring. The reinforcement of a coordinated speech-writing sequence should give students greater control and a firmer grasp of the processes. Below is a brief outline for the two-semester writing sequence that one of my colleagues, Howard Sage, and I developed for this project.

Overview of Lesson Plans for Writing Component

Beginning Writing

Topic	Class Activity
Choosing and Limiting a Subject Stating the Thesis Sentence	Analyzing photos in depth in pairs and presenting results to the group for feedback.
The Composing Process: Pre-Writing Audience Analysis Outlining Planning the Composition	Group reaction to and discussion of topics. Group outlining. Role playing: speaker and audience.
Focus Unity Completeness, especially adequacy of evidence.	Audience response when oral "first draft" deviates from the main idea. What is enough development? Audience stops speaker when it is satisfied, convinced.
Syntax: Patterns Expansion Reduction	Group construction, expansion, reductions of sentences. Read such sentences aloud for feedback. Sentence stress hear orally as indicator of syntactical complexity.
Diction	
Grammatical Difficulties	Many of these problems originate in poor listening skills translated into inaccurate pronounciation and can be eliminated by listening skills training.

Generally, the above topics will be presented throughout the semester with reference to first drafts in speech forms; feedback, including audience reaction worksheets; reading aloud to hear one's own errors; design techniques, for example, supplementing one's written or spoken composition with visuals; use of the video taping of compositions.

Intermediate Writing

General Approach

Even more than on level A, the approach here is one of audience feedback and group work. All the topics stated below lend themselves very well to the Socratic method, namely, statement and response.

Pre-Writing (review)

Observation

Selection of Material

(Unity)
(Order) a review
(Completeness)
(Coherence)

Beginning and Endings of Compositions

Rhetorical Modes:

Narration
Description
Analysis
Comparison and Contrast
Definition
Various Methods Combined

Style

Snytax (treated throughout)
Punctuation

The most important benefits of this program belong to the students. The coordinated speech-composition sequence, with its emphasis on oral first drafts of writings and audience feedback, promises to give students greatly enhanced ability to self-correct their compositions so that they perceive themselves as composers-in-process. A simultaneous reduction in the teacher's role as authority should follow. The former authority can now function as facilitator. Likely additional benefits for students include increased confidence as composers and a more sophisticated sense of and new respect for the relationship between the written and spoken word. Students should discover a new capacity to function in groups, derived from the aural/oral emphasis of the sequence and from group composing sessions.

In addition, focusing on audience as is done in speech courses also leads students to organize their messages around specific communication purposes for specific audiences. Many of the problems encountered by student composers--writers or speakers--reflect a tendency to transcribe inner speech. To counteract this, the student must adopt a difficult perspective; he must move from "writer based" prose to "reader based" prose, and one means of achieving this is by concentrating on the audience, a natural focus of speech. This is also provoked when questions from a live audience elicit the explanation and transition absent in the composer's inner musings, and initiate him/her into the elaborated and explicit detail required by academic writing.

Without doubt the sequence will reverse the fragmenting process of separate speech and writing courses, and it will utilize the whole person. Additionally, the use of this mode of instruction transforms students from passive recipients of didactic prescriptions to active, independent learner-creators. They observe, identify, and judge specific activities in the speaking, listening, and composing process with the subsidiary consequence of the development of students' powers of observation, reflection, and inference making.

ENDNOTES

[1]Class, Code, and Control (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1971), I, p. 143.

[2]William Labov, Language in the Inner City: Studies in the Black English Vernacular (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1972).

[3]Richard Ohmann, "Reflections on Class and Language," College English, 44 (January, 1982), 1-17.

[4]"Cognitive Development and the Basic Writer," College English, 41 (January, 1979), 38.

[5]College English, 43 (March, 1981), 270.

[6]Andrew Wilkinson, Gillian Barnsley, Peter Hanna, and Margaret Swan, "Assessing Language Development: The Credition Project," Language for Learning, I, (June, 1979), 65.

[7]Roy M. Berko, "How Can We Deal with the Academically Deficient Oral Communication Student at the College Level" (paper presented at the Convention of the Eastern Communication Association, Hartford, Connecticut, May 9, 1981). See also, Roy M. Berko and Fran Bostwick. Basic-ly Communicating: An Activity Approach (Dubuque, Iowa: Wm. C. Brown Company Publishers, 1983).

[8]Teresa A. Nance, "Helping Academically Troubled Students: An Alternative Approach" (paper presented at the Convention of the Eastern Communication Association, Hartford, Connecticut, May 9, 1981), pp. 6-7.

[9]"The Winds of Change: Thomas Kuhn and The Revolution in the Teaching of Writing," College Composition and Communication, XXXIII (February, 1982), 86.

[10]Linda Flower and John R. Hayes, "A Cognitive Process Theory of Writing," College Composition and Communication, XXXII (December, 1981), 377.

[11]Lev Vygotsky, Thought and Language, trans. by Eugenia Hanfmann and Gertrude Vakar (Cambridge, Ma.: MIT Press, 1962), p. 97.

[12]"Writing, Inner Speech, and Meditation," College English, 44 (March, 1982), 234.

[13]Flower and Hayes, 369-384.

[14]Teaching the Universe of Discourse (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1968), p. 202.

[15]Walker Gibson, "The Writing Teacher as a Dumb Reader," College Composition and Communication, XXX (May, 1979), 192.